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## FEMINIST, POSTMODERN, VIOLENT: POSTWAR *FILM NOIR* ROMANCE, AND THE UNDOING OF TRUTH AND SUBJECTIVITY

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This essay asks what happens to hegemonic discourses around gender, identity and subjectivity when the stable frame of reference within which they typically operate shatters under the pressure of cinematic and narrative oversaturation. Through a close analysis of Nicholas Ray's *film noir* *In a Lonely Place* (1950), the article traces the representational undermining of post-WWII Western masculinity, which is revealed to be in a state of perpetual crisis. It shows how sexual difference is depicted as a key element informing the notion of agency, but with a surprising result: instead of the typical hierarchy of classic Hollywood films—in which the woman on the screen occupies a passive to-be-looked-at position (Mulvey 1975)—*In a Lonely Place* complicates the formula by giving its female protagonist more agency over the narrative than its male anti-hero, thereby marking the film as a provocative feminist text. In later parts of the essay, I focus on the film's *noir* features such as narrative loose ends and plot inconsistencies, and what they reveal about the inherent violence of normative forms of storytelling, both cinematic and otherwise.

**Key words:** *film noir*, Hollywood, cinema, gender, masculinity, femininity, feminism, postmodernism, violence

309

*Film noir* is a preeminent genre of film, whose influences continually transgress its spatial and temporal origins in 1940s Hollywood. Initially identified as a cinematic genre by postwar French film critics, *film noir* is an elusive category. It is characterized by a noted transformation from the classic Hollywood style of cinema, and includes “a shift towards *chiaroscuro* visual stylization; a critique of the values of postwar American society; a new ‘psychological’ trend in the representation of character; and a recurring attention to excessive and obsessive sexuality” (Krutnik 2006: x). At the same time, character psychologizing is undertaken in *noir* with stubborn and perhaps contradictory attention on the inadequacy of neat psychological portraits or explanations of human actions (since the unconscious of

both protagonist and spectator interfere, making coherent plotlines and motivations inadequate). As Joan Copjec observes with respect to *noir* fiction and film, "when anything can mean its opposite, we are no longer able to proceed from assured principles" (Copjec 1993: viii). This may be one of the best ways to summarize *film noir* as a genre.

In this essay, I focus on Nicholas Ray's *In a Lonely Place* (1950), a curiously atypical *film noir* (although perhaps the genre itself stipulates that all examples are atypical), which tells the story of renowned yet notorious Hollywood screenwriter Dixon ("Dix") Steele (played by Humphrey Bogart, one of the genre's staples). Dixon becomes a suspect in the murder of the young hat check girl, Mildred—a woman who, before being killed in a moving car and thrown out onto the side of the road, was last seen by witnesses (and the film's audience) at Dixon Steele's house. The film revolves around the suspense of did he/didn't he kill Mildred, which is exactly what is on the mind of Dixon's enigmatic and glamorous neighbor Laurel Gray (Gloria Grahame, Nicholas Ray's then-wife), who initially tells police that she saw Mildred leaving alone on the night of her murder, only to become increasingly suspicious of Dixon after she becomes romantically involved with him and discovers his violent streak.

310

I look closely at several key aspects of the film, which expose it as a complex text overburdened with visual and narrative signification, and whose deeper implications reveal critical commentary about: post-WWII gender roles in the US; the Hollywood film industry and its fetishism of success; and the violence inherent in coherent narrative plotlines in a broader sense. Perhaps the film's most transcendental feature relates to its meta-commentary about cinematic romance, particularly in the subversion of the typical gender roles required in traditional scenarios of the romance film genre. The film's romantic couple—Dixon Steele and Laurel Gray—fail to conform to the stereotypical tropes of romantic protagonists, which are typically organized around the heteronormative axis of passive, feminine women and active, masculine men. To some extent, *film noir* could be said to always operate outside the aforementioned norm: its male heroes often prove to be weaker than the threatening femme fatales, who in turn bring about the men's tragic downfall. Yet as an atypical *film noir*, *In a Lonely Place* does not engage in this well-established dynamic either, choosing to challenge spectatorial expectations within the genres of both *film noir* and romance. Steele and Gray's inability to successfully enact either the traditional romance gender tropes or their *film noir* counterparts exposes the ways in which unruly identities are disciplined in order to preserve

the coherence of stable narrative formations. *In a Lonely Place* destabilizes such narratives of romance by creating a self-reflexive slippage between the characters' attempts to conform to the norm, and their inability to do so. What becomes visible in this slippage is the culture's violent underside, which seeks to discipline those loose elements that do not fit the preexisting mold. As is befitting of a *film noir*, *In a Lonely Place* offers red herrings and loose ends in place of narrative and visual coherence, as a way to challenge insistence on logic and discursive discipline. In the following, I examine the film's narrative and formal structure in order to mine questions of gender roles, sexual difference, subjectivity and social agency, as illuminated through the film's postwar romance anti-narrative.

#### WHAT'S IN A NAME? BEHIND THE MASK OF *FILM NOIR*'S LONELY PLACE

The novel *In a Lonely Place*, written by Dorothy Hughes, was originally published in 1947. It was lauded as a feminist *noir* classic, since it was seen as harshly critiquing the postwar return to masculinist dominance and the relegation of women (back) to the private sphere. In the novel, Dixon Steele is indeed the killer—a serial one, for that matter. Christopher Breu (2009) argues that the novel offers a complex diagnosis of the state of American urban postwar culture, in which (white) men inflict both symbolic and literal violence on women by way of reclaiming their top position in the culture's hierarchy of privilege. In the cinematic version of the story, things are not so clear-cut, since Dixon is cleared of the murder through the off-screen confession of Mildred's boyfriend. As I will discuss, however, this off-screen confession should not necessarily be seen as definitive evidence of Dixon's innocence.

While the novel makes Dixon quite literally (through murder) enact the postwar violent policing of womanhood, and the insistence that women return to the private sphere (as Breu points out, in the novel Dixon kills *only* working women), the film steps away from such an overtly feminist agenda and posits Dixon as an ambiguous figure, whose downfall functions as a critique of a culture that creates impossible masculinist expectations for its men (and feminine ones for women, but that is a secondary concern in the film). The cinematic Dixon is stuck in limbo between being a masculine man who uses his fists to communicate his life philosophies (if he has any), and being a romantic lover who quotes Shakespeare and squeezes grapefruit juice for his lady in the morning. This is the most striking difference in

the scope of the novel and its cinematic adaptation—while the novel offers a diagnosis that sees men as inflictors of violence (although the state is implicated as well), the film shifts gears to reveal the larger patriarchal system as the greatest bully, whose “victims” are not only women, but men as well.

James W. Palmer (1985) claims that this is the key difference between the novel and the film. While the novel depicts events from the point of view of a predator (Dixon-as-serial killer), the film represents Dixon as prey, the subject of a hunt in which growing paranoia is the organizing sentiment of everyone’s actions. Palmer ties these paranoid overtones to the dominant sentiment in Hollywood at the time, and to the increasing fear of trusting anyone in the industry completely and unconditionally. Additionally, Palmer treats the motif of the hunt as one of the most consistent elements of Nicholas Ray’s filmmaking, also seen in *They Live By Night* (1948) and *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955).

Ray’s *In a Lonely Place* was originally going to be called *Behind This Mask*. Both titles offer intriguing examples of ambiguity embedded in the very naming of the text, which then extends into its every frame. What does “behind this mask” refer to? Probably the enigma that is Dixon Steele, the man whose violence remains unpredictable and menacing to others throughout the film. The film’s fascination with his psyche is reflected in the working title itself. And what does the film discover behind this mask? In a rather typical *noir* twist, there does not seem to be much hidden meaning or coherence in what is behind the mask of Dixon’s persona. In other words, Dixon wears his complexities on his sleeve—he is overburdened, and creatively and emotionally paralyzed by being in an impossible position, in which societal expectations of productivity and success are imposed on him. Unable to comply with these expectations, Dixon turns to violence as a way of expressing his frustration. He is in a perpetual state of crisis. The times of his biggest success as a screenwriter are in the past, he refers to himself as a “nobody,” and his violent outbursts are seen more as a habit than an exception to the rule. Moreover, it may not be too far-fetched to imagine that “this” mask in the working title might refer to the film’s second central character, Laurel. As I will show, she is not an entirely innocent agent in this story, but rather a woman whose motivation remains as obscure as some of Dixon’s darkest sides.

It is also possible that the mask in the working title refers to Hollywood itself (the film voices some rather harsh criticism of the industry), and also to the larger cultural context of the film’s making, as the character of Dixon is inevitably a product of the historical climate of the times. Either way, the underlying implication is that any or all of these meanings can be applied, since the film reveals masks to be everywhere, to such an extent that they

become invisible because of their omnipresence. The crisis emerges when they become apparent, as they do in many examples of *film noir*.

The film's final title is equally complex and telling. The "lonely place" might refer to the well-established alienation of the (post)modern subject generally, but also, more specifically to Hollywood as an industry, accepting and ruthless in equal measure. At the same time, the lonely place is overtly linked to Dixon's inner struggle with his creativity (or lack thereof) as a writer, and his ethical struggle with violence and accountability. This is a decidedly endemic state of both *noir* anti-heroes and postwar masculinity in crisis. Silver and Ward claim that:

Steele is a *noir* hero trapped in a compulsive role; caught, almost frozen, between the dark past and a bleak future, he is unable to see a continuum that valorizes the present except through Laurel. Hence Steele is literally and figuratively in a lonely place. (Silver and Ward 1979: 146)

In this he fits the standard male positioning of the genre, where *noir* films "reveal an obsession with male figures who are both internally divided and alienated from the culturally permissible (or ideal) parameters of masculine identity, desire and achievement" (Krutnik: xiii). Since the film is so actively invested in exploring the darker aspects of Dixon's psyche—albeit offering no conclusive answers about this complicated man—the lonely place would most obviously be his inner world, or what lurks behind that mask of the film's working title. Both titles offer static spatial features—one is "behind", the other "in." Yet the space that they envision remains as obscure and mysterious to the film's protagonists as it does to the viewer. Could it be that the only thing that lies "behind" or "in" the film's spatial domain is a wasteland of uncertainty and the inability of the protagonists to maintain the coherent narrative of their lives, as exemplified by the loose ends we are left with in the end? In this, the film reflects one of film noir's noted influences—Freud's psychoanalytic theories, which, as Frank Krutnik notes, were popularized in the US (including Hollywood) in the 1940s, around the time *film noir* emerged as a genre. If Freud's basic theoretical premise suggests the existence of a vast, mysterious and unknowable unruly unconscious in the human psyche, Dixon Steele is the embodiment of such an insight, since his own psyche is often ruled by drives he cannot entirely control or fully know.

If we extend the scope of the film and take it as a commentary on the state of the American postwar male subject more generally, the lonely place in the title could be understood as postwar culture itself. This is a culture that contains more violence and menace than moments of relief and happiness.

As the postmodern subject is forced into societal constraints geared towards acceptable performances of identity (that seek to disguise its unruly parts), culture itself, and not its subjects, is revealed as the deceitful and violent agent *par excellence*. *In a Lonely Place* is just one in a long stream of *film noir* titles that make such a diagnosis. As Breu puts it:

Such is the ambiguous promise of *noir*, to uncover the infectious wounds that have been imperfectly scabbed over by the work of ideology. *Noir* thus invites us to reopen the cleavages of social violence, demanding that we cut away the irregular sutures provided by our idealizing fictions of the world and confront the wound in its intransigent refusal to disappear. (Breu 2009: 199)

In the opening scene of *In a Lonely Place*, the emergence of the “cleavages of social violence” is alluded to with a striking street shot, seen through the windscreen of a moving car, with the driver Dixon Steele’s eyes visible in the rearview mirror. While the car is moving forward, Steele’s eyes are looking back, almost directly at the camera and the figurative spectator. Right here at the beginning then, the film suggests its own self-reflexive awareness. The audience is exposed as constitutive of, rather than outside the apparatus, and this *noir* anti-hero, a washed out, formerly successful screenwriter, is caught in the limbo between moving forward (with the ever-changing postwar American society) and looking back to a time when things were less complicated and easier for him.

Yet, although these self-conscious elements of the film should comfortably position it as a *film noir*, certain elements differentiate *In a Lonely Place* from other *noir* titles to such an extent that Dana Polan (1994) questions whether Ray’s film can be classed as such. Polan bases his doubt on the fact that the film does not have the complex flashback structure typical of the genre, nor such textbook *noir* elements as a private detective, or a femme fatale. He goes on to argue that *In a Lonely Place* has as many elements of a screwball comedy as it does of the *noir* genre, and outlines elements of female gothic film as well. Yet, what Polan’s problematizing of *In a Lonely Place* as *noir* seems to overlook is the fact that not a single *film noir* has all of the given elements of the genre, and that this is a loose category to begin with. In fact, this is what makes the genre so vital and elusive: its features are constantly re-calibrated and negotiated.

The elements of screwball comedy and female gothic film that Polan identifies are present in the film inasmuch as *noir* as a genre is characteristically involved in intertextually and self-reflexively referring to the history of the cinematic medium. As Breu claims, “*noir* is not so

much a genre, as a negative deformation and phantasmatic volatilization of other genres such as the hardboiled detective story, the crime story, and the romance narrative" (Breu 2009: 199). This is precisely how *In a Lonely Place* functions. Elements of standard romance narratives, female gothic film or screwball comedy are put in intertextual quotation marks and self-reflexively emphasized, as exemplified in the scene between Dixon and Laurel in the latter's kitchen. In this scene, the pair's pseudo-romantic morning serves as the film's self-conscious way of critically commenting on stereotypical depictions of romance in film. In fact, Dixon himself makes it explicit, telling Laurel that if they were in a film, this particular scene would make people watching it believe that the two of them were in love. This self-referential highlighting of itself as a film—while showing the audience that its interpretations are constantly being manipulated—is not typically featured either in screwball comedies or female gothic film. The simultaneous reflexive citation and critique of other genres is, however, often seen in films we consider quintessentially *noir*, and is one of the most striking features that makes the genre of *film noir* so hard to capture in static and definitive terms.

At the same time, one aspect of the film that Polan argues is typically associated with screwball comedy—the fast changing, witty dialogue—is often seen in the most typical examples of *film noir* as well. Therefore, what Polan sees as proof that *In a Lonely Place* is as much a screwball comedy as it is *film noir* is yet another recognizable trait of the latter form. If the two genres are seen to share this particular feature of witty dialogue, *In a Lonely Place* is nevertheless more *noir* than a lighthearted comedy, since its serious themes of violence and dark psychic obsession do not only not have comedy as their dominant mode, but also rarely invoke any kind of temporal comic relief.

315

## CINEMATIC CHARACTERIZATION OF MASCULINITY IN CRISIS: VIOLENCE AND ITS "MACGUFFINS"

"There is something wrong with Dix, isn't there?"

Laurel Gray

The film's lack of comic relief brings us to its complex central character, Dixon Steele. To what extent is he a typical *film noir* anti-hero, and where does he violate the supposed norms of the genre? He is certainly the film's



most complicated and troubled figure (although, as I will show, Laurel follows as a close second). The study of a violent, destructive character we get through Bogart's performance (a quintessential *noir* face) resists easy classifications or answers that would comfortably resolve the dilemma of Dixon's culpability in the crime. What we get instead is a highly disturbing portrayal of masculinity under pressure; a man who is, for the most part, seen in an uneasy liminal space between conforming to expectations of decency in human conduct, and violently denying those expectations by verbally or physically assaulting others. Dixon's unease with the world does not stand as an isolated study of a lone individual—its power stems instead from its citational nature, echoing a larger context in which a postmodern subject finds itself stuck between expectation and desire. Desire, or rather its lack of fulfillment due to the constant pressure to conform to expectations, is what drives Dixon to destroy most of his relationships. Robert Kolker on the centrality of desire notes, "the film has many of the trappings of noir, but its concern is with the implosion of male desire" (Kolker 2011: 25). In another nod to psychoanalysis, Dixon's desire lies somewhere between eros and tanatos, bringing them closely together to create a tension that explodes in violence and frustration.

316

Take the mystery of Mildred's murder, for instance. From when she firsts appears on screen, she is framed as a potential object of Dixon's desire. In fact, she herself suspects Dixon of having "indecent" intentions, first after he invites her to his place, and again after he quickly changes into his pajamas once they are in his home. Both times she is quickly reassured by Dixon that he does not have "those" intentions, yet ambiguity remains, in the ways in which he flirts with her, and in which the camera frames her as a possible object of desire and the threatening male gaze. The viewer is thus encouraged to participate in this ambiguity and observe Mildred as an object of desire, especially during the moments in which she breaks the fourth wall and addresses the camera directly, such as when she retells the plot of the novel to Dix. She does so facing the camera, which, with this device, embodies the male protagonist and his potentially threatening gaze, as well as being aligned with the spectator (Figure 1). Mildred is being offered for visual scrutiny, both to us and to Dixon. The fact that Dixon seemingly never acts on that potential desire (at least not on screen), and that Mildred ends up dead, thrown out of a car by the side of the road, links eros and tanatos through the suppression of one and the enactment of the other. For a *film noir*, death's close relation to desire is certainly nothing shocking, but rather a familiar trope that is seen as one of the genre's organizing leitmotifs.





317

Figure 1: Mildred breaks the fourth wall in order to foreshadow the film's plot (*In a Lonely Place*)

The mystery of whether or not Dixon killed Mildred is the film's red herring for those invested in making sense of the unconscious drives as knowable and finite. In his consideration of this aspect of the film, Palmer claims that Mildred's murder is, in fact, the film's MacGuffin (a plotline positioned as important, but ultimately irrelevant to the film's deeper meaning). While Palmer's point about the irrelevance of the murder is noted, I argue that it is not only Mildred's murder, but the subsequent investigation into that murder that provides the MacGuffin. It is a procedural search for an answer that cannot be satisfactorily achieved without further suppression of all the ways in which psychic drives are volatile and threatening, and unstable and violent. Therefore, in the film's deeper structure, it is of secondary importance whether Dixon did or did not kill Mildred. Moreover, Palmer takes for granted that the film clears Dixon of that crime, while I suggest that the outcome is much more ambiguous. Mildred's boyfriend's confession takes place off screen, and is only discovered through a telephone

conversation between Dixon, Laurel and the detectives. Additionally, the detectives mention that the boyfriend is wounded, but do not explain how or why—what does this off-screen wound have to do with the off-screen confession? Are they connected, or random occurrences? The film seems to be saying that these questions do not matter much. After going to great lengths to depict both the plausibility and impossibility of Dixon being a murderer, the film's "resolution" of the crime is relegated to an off screen event, which comes too late to influence the fate of Dixon and Laurel's doomed romance. With this, the film confirms the investigation plot as a MacGuffin—it was central to the film only while Dixon's desire was inspected through it in the earlier parts of the film. Once his desire is directed at Laurel (in increasingly controlling ways), the investigation plot fades and Mildred's initial significance becomes a vague memory. In fact, Mildred's death and the subsequent investigation have a single practical outcome—they incite the romance between Dixon and Laurel, whose first conversation, not coincidentally, takes place in the detectives' office.

Although its outcome is downplayed, and the supposed perpetrator's confession never seen on screen, the investigation is a reminder of the complicated relationship between the individual and the law, espousing another important aspect of *film noir*. As Breu claims,

*Noir* is best characterized as a resolutely negative cultural fantasy about the relationship of the subject to the law, one that finds expression in a wide range of twentieth century literary and filmic texts and that functions as both a condensation of and a catalyst for various forms of social negativity that are distinct to the middle decades of the twentieth century. (Breu 2009: 200)

In *In a Lonely Place*, Dixon experiences this "negative cultural fantasy" by being subjected to the gaze of the law throughout most of the film. In this gaze, his every action, no matter how mundane, is a potentially significant symptom, and proof of him being a murderer. Seen as examples of Freud's deferred action, Dixon's violent acts and incidents of the past (which took place long before Mildred was killed) become potentially plausible evidence that he is the murderer. Dixon is subjected to a double gaze here—the spectator gazes at him inquisitively while he is being interrogated by the authorities, invited to scrutinize him by the ever-growing legal suspicion that he might, in fact, be the killer. Visual traces of suspicion and ominous foreshadowing are evident in shots such as that immediately following Dixon and Laurel's first kiss. As Dixon pulls back, we see Laurel over his shoulder, with his hand eerily resting on her neck. This gesture of intimacy could as

easily be interpreted as a visual reference to Mildred’s murder (Figure 2). The threat of violence is never far from the film’s surface.



Figure 2: Dixon and Laurel: visual hints of a looming threat, or signs of intimate contact? (*In a Lonely Place*)

Yet Dixon is not a simple, one-dimensional subject of the inquisitive gaze either (if such a thing exists). He toys with scrutiny, subverting it at times by perpetually playing into the possibility that he is the killer. He controls this speculation and suspicion as much as the detectives or the audience do—a reminder of his cinematic profession as a screenwriter, who is in charge of the story. This is best exemplified in the scene in which Dixon visits his detective friend’s house, and makes the detective and his wife enact a possible scenario in which Dixon is Mildred’s murderer. In this striking scene of double role-play, the suspicion that Dixon does not invent the scenario but rather reenacts the actual event of the murder is emphasized by the *chiaroscuro* lighting of Bogart’s face—his eyes are lit as he “directs” the scene between the detective and his wife (who are now

playing Dixon and Mildred), and those eyes express a disturbing pleasure at having the two "actors" (re)enact a possible version of events in which Dixon brutally kills Mildred (Figure 3). What Dixon does quite effectively here is to play with the suspicious gaze directed at him, acknowledging that he can have a certain amount of power over the way in which it casts him as either innocent or guilty.



Figure 3: The lighting trick: Dixon Steele directing a reenactment of the murder (*In a Lonely Place*)

This critical agency that Dixon exhibits through at least temporarily controlling the suspicious gaze directed at him does little, however, to negate the notion of "stuck-ness" associated with postwar masculinity in crisis. No matter how effectively Dixon toys with suspicion, he is ultimately revealed as incapable of controlling the outcome of the suspicious gaze. Even though he is supposedly cleared of the crime, this does nothing to salvage his relationship with Laurel, and its promise of a more hopeful future. This limbo of postmodern masculinity occurs in a historical moment in which

men returning from the war (Dixon among them) find that the situation at home has changed, with women increasingly entering the public sphere through professional work, growing visibility, and more pronounced social agency. As a result, some men find themselves in a liminal position, negotiating between women's entrance into this sphere and their own impulse to win the space back in order to make it intrinsically masculine once more. Dixon attempts to regain control over the social sphere by becoming increasingly controlling of Laurel. Breu summarizes the situation as follows:

I want to suggest that it is precisely in its confrontation with the postwar cultural reassertion of male power and privilege that the representation of gendered antagonism in 1940s and 1950s *noir* gains its historical urgency. This gendered antagonism characteristically plays itself out around the definition of public and private space in postwar *noir*, marking the ways in which the reprivatization of women's roles and the reassertion of the public sphere as largely or exclusively (white) male were central ideological projects of the era. Thus it is not a crisis of masculinity so much as an aggressive reassertion of male privilege that lends postwar *noir* its specific gendered charge. (Breu 2009: 201)

This "gendered charge" plays out in *In a Lonely Place* through the brutal murder of Mildred, as well as in the tortured relationship between Laurel and Dixon. Mildred is seemingly punished for unapologetically, and somewhat crudely, trespassing this contested public domain, while Laurel is nearly strangled for exercising agency through her plans to escape from Dixon and their impending marriage, which he has planned. Instead of settling for being Dixon's wife, Laurel attempts to escape this imposed (re)domestication by buying a ticket to New York. When Dixon discovers this, he erupts in violence, and the gendered charge of the era is demonstrated in the physical struggle between him and Laurel. Dixon enacts gendered violence not only in the physical act of strangling, but also by refusing to allow Laurel to act independently, or to reassert control over her own life. It could be argued, then, that Dixon's violence towards Laurel begins much earlier than the actual physical strangling—it starts with his proposition of a marriage that would see Laurel controlled and relegated to the private sphere to which, according to the dominant ideology of the time, women belonged.

Elaine Tyler May (1988) describes the depression era and wartime drive to contain women in domesticity as being located in the fear of the "impending doom of the family," and the ever-growing economic and sexual independence of women. According to May, "fears of sexual chaos tend to surface during times of crisis and growing social change" (May 1988: 81).

In the *noir* context, Mary Ann Doane (1991) shows how femme fatales espouse male fears of female control and agency. Considered in this context, Dixon's marriage proposal reads as an attempt to control both Laurel's economic status and her sexual agency, as the convergence of female sexual and economic independence is seen as a woman's most dangerous weapon towards riding herself of masculine control. In fact, idyllic family life is a distant reality for *In a Lonely Place*, to the extent to which it seems unfitting to refer to it as "reality" at all—rather, it is a fantasy that cannot be achieved no matter how eager Dixon is to marry Laurel, since the world they live in does not allow for things to fall back into more stable and "traditional" structures (if that stability ever truly existed).

The film's ending therefore depicts the failure of masculinity to reassert itself as an authority that can take back the public sphere in a sovereign, controlling way. The violence with which these attempts of re-assertion are enacted, no matter how threatening, cannot effectively contain women "in their place," especially in light of the film's perpetual blurring of public and private spheres, and the erasing of the boundaries between them. Is this the lonely place to which the title of the film refers? A place in which postmodern man finds that he cannot retain masculinist control, and prevent change from happening? The "re-masculinization" of the public sphere fails in the film, signifying a crisis of the positionality of not only masculinity, but femininity as well, since we see Laurel looking on in desperation at the film's conclusion, wondering if she made a mistake by putting up a fight instead of letting Dixon's vision of their domesticated future prevail.

322

## THE COMPLEXITY OF THE FEMININE

The film shifts focus in its third act, largely concentrating on Laurel's growing doubts about Dix's violent character, and her looming suspicion that he is guilty of murder after all. Laurel is not a character without complexities in her own right. While Dana Polan sees her as a feminist character, standing up to a man who attempts to control every aspect of her life, his analysis does not discuss the curious obfuscation of Laurel's motivation. From the start, Laurel seems interested in Dixon in ways that are not necessarily transparent. At the beginning of the film, we see her looking down from her apartment into his with some interest. This spatial orientation of their respective apartments is not accidental. It is almost a

complete reversal of Mulvey's (1975) argument that a woman is the object of the gaze in classic Hollywood films, looked at and desired, but never a subject in her own right. Laurel's standing above, with a better view of Dixon's apartment than he has of hers (according to his own assessment), positions her differently from what Mulvey sees as a typically passive, to-be-looked-at, and visually objectified woman in classic Hollywood film. Here, Laurel has the power of the all-seeing eye, while Dixon's gaze is obstructed. In fact, if we were to extend this analysis to *film noir* in general, one could argue that the whole genre undermines Mulvey's theory, since femme fatales, so closely associated with the genre, typically reveal that their own gazes can have dire consequences for the films' male (anti-)heroes.

Yet, while Laurel, like *noir*'s iconic femme fatales, presents a counterpoint to Mulvey's women-as-objects-to-be-looked-at proposition, she herself is not a femme fatale, at least not in any easily defined, quintessential way. Most authors who have written about the film cast Laurel as a "good girl" who finds herself in a difficult situation when exposed to the complexity of Dixon's masculinist violence (when we first encounter her she has just fled from her former boyfriend, another pushy and dominating man). Many critics see her as a character whose motivations are pure and whose purpose in life is to love and be loved. Polan goes so far as to cast Laurel as belonging to the female gothic film tradition, in which heroines are "innocent and often socially average women" (Polan 1993: 21).<sup>1</sup> Yet the deeper story of Laurel is more complex than a straightforward casting of her as "innocent" or "socially average" allows, since many questions about her actions remain unanswered. She seems curious about Dixon's activities from the beginning, showing particular interest on the night he brings Mildred home. When Laurel is interviewed at the police station about the night of Mildred's killing, she does not seem surprised to hear that the woman she saw with Dixon that night was killed brutally a few hours later. It is not a stretch to say that this is not the typical behavior of a "good girl" whose motivations are innocent and pure. Not only is Laurel utterly unmoved by the news of Mildred's killing, she is similarly not disturbed by the implication that Dixon might have been the killer. Calmly and without hesitation, she offers Dixon a solid alibi, testifying that she saw Mildred leave his apartment alone, even though it is never completely clear whether she actually did

<sup>1</sup> The links between *film noir* and female gothic film have also been explored by Helen Hanson in *Hollywood Heroines: Women in Film Noir and the Female Gothic Film* (2007).



(her subsequent doubts about Dixon's innocence seem to indicate that she did not see Mildred leave alone).

In the police interrogation scene in which Laurel answers the detectives' questions, the positionality of the gazes emphasize the unspoken power play that is taking place in the room. Laurel looks at the detectives and answers their questions, while Dixon sits behind her. Arguably, he has more power in this set up since he can see her and she cannot see him. This would complicate the typical assumption that the one who is giving an alibi is more powerful than the suspect himself, if things were not slightly strange already. For instance, what is the suspect doing in the interrogation room? This seems unusual, especially since later in the interview, Dixon starts asking Lauren questions himself, as if she, rather than he, were the suspect.

Later, when Dixon's agent looks Laurel up in the industry registry, we discover that she is an aspiring actress who has been trying to make it in Hollywood for some time. The film's unspoken implication about Laurel's motivation seems to be that the quick alibi she offers Dixon in the interrogation room centers on her hope that having Dixon owe her a favor might advance her stagnant career. This explanation of Laurel's opaque motivation becomes even more plausible when, later in the film, we see her quickly and comfortably take control of Dixon's apartment (she seems to have all but moved in), his work (she retypes everything he writes), and his time (she decides who gets to see him and when). Laurel does subsequently land a role in Dixon's new screenplay, before things start going awry and her increasing doubt destroys their relationship (without which she will presumably lose her role, again directly correlating their romance and her career).

The status of a woman's desire is not a secondary aspect of the film; in many ways it is central to the film's narrative, and an aspect that moves the plot forward. I argue that Laurel consciously embodies the performative role of a submissive female companion only to the extent to which it serves her interests, and begins to back off only when she starts fearing that her life might be in danger, and after it becomes clear that Dixon is too unstable to finish the projects he is expected to work on (in a telling scene, he slaps his agent and, with it, alienates his few remaining industry friends). With this, rather than being the passive "good girl," Laurel approaches the *femme fatale* trope, where a woman and her ambition bring about the downfall of the male protagonist. After her doubt gets the better of her and the promise of a successful future becomes a distant illusion, she plans to flee to New York on the day they are supposed to be married, intending to leave

without openly telling Dixon her reasons. Even though the spectator is invited to be invested in Dixon's state of mind and the question of whether he is capable of a brutal murder, the story that takes place seemingly in the background—the evasiveness of Laurel's desire and motivation—proves to be as relevant to the unfolding of events as any other aspect of the film. Laurel is an active participant in the course of events, at times to a larger extent than Dixon himself. By the end of the film, Dixon has come to depend on Laurel's love more than she depends on his (the typical gender roles having now reversed). As she looks for ways to set herself free, Dixon's trusted agent suggests they bring his screenplay to production, since, he notes, "if Dix has success, he doesn't need anything else." This comment about Hollywood's fetishism of success can be easily applied to Laurel as well. In a way, their romance is framed within the *mise-en-abyme* structure of a film within a film. It is suggested more than once that the script Dixon is working on is really about their own romance. With this, *In a Lonely Place* foreshadows its own ending when, in an earlier scene, Dixon makes Laurel say the following lines from his script: "I was born when she kissed me, I died when she left me, I lived a few weeks while she loved me."

The film's emphasis on the agency of the female protagonist frames it as a feminist text that does not shy away from depicting the less favorable, less appealing, and deeply complex aspects of its female protagonist and her ambition. This critical feminist angle highlighting the treatment of women is illuminated early in the film, when Dixon encounters an actress he used to date, and is dismissive of her presence. "Do you look down on all women, or just the ones you know?" she asks, before walking defiantly away.

The question of Laurel's complicity in giving an alibi to Mildred's potential murderer is not a simple question of where to place the blame; rather it gives credit to a plot that does not subscribe to the easy clichés of either making a woman passive and unable to control the events around her, or overly villainous and conniving in her drive to destroy the male protagonist. Laurel is somewhere in between, in the gray area that her last name—Gray—overtly indicates. *In a Lonely Place* treads the uncomfortable middle ground in which Laurel is neither the "good girl," nor quite the femme fatale. The film is, rather, invested in pointedly showing that there is much gray territory between these two cinematic extremes. In placing Laurel in this area, the film illuminates a feminist angle through which the pressures of postwar gender roles incite a woman to push against the dominant structures of social power.

## SUBJECTIVITY, NARRATIVE (IN)COHERENCE AND THE VIOLENCE OF CULTURE

326

The film's most pervasive subtext is its focus on storytelling as violent in its own right, obsessively invested in creating sanitized, coherent narratives by violently suppressing unwanted, messy truths. *Film noir* persistently tackles this conundrum, by frequently depicting narrative plots that do not fully add up, and by focusing on red herrings and plotlines that turn out to be secondary to what is *actually* going on (perhaps the most famous cinematic example of such a *noiresque* red herring is the Maltese falcon in John Houston's eponymous film). In *In a Lonely Place*, the structure of cinematic storytelling, as well as its shortcomings, is often overtly highlighted. The focus is reflected in the protagonist himself, who is a screenwriter—a storyteller of the cinematic kind. At the same time, Dixon is utterly cynical about his profession, and seems particularly disillusioned with the (dream-producing) industry that he is an integral part of. On one level, the film functions as a critique of Hollywood's commercialism and desire for excessively sanitized and neatly packaged stories. To counter that, the film frequently offers a re-telling of both real and invented stories, as well as reenactments and doubts about the truth of what is being said. When Mildred enthusiastically summarizes the story of the novel that Dixon is supposed to adapt into a screenplay but has not read himself, he sneers at its soap-opera plot twists and commercial appeal. Yet that stereotypical story is not neatly coherent either. In the story that Mildred is retelling, the mystery of the murder is never fully resolved, just as in the film itself. In this foreshadowing *mise-en-abyme*, Mildred unknowingly articulates the threat of the film's never fully contained violence. Similar to the way in which the heroine's husband's death remains a mystery in the novel, Mildred's imminent death will become not only a whodunit detective plot that drives the film's surface structure (although not being what the film is *actually* about), but is simultaneously one of the film's repressed violent acts, never fully confronted either visually or psychologically. Mildred's dead body, for instance, is seen solely in photographs, and the audience is only presented with the spectacle of Mildred's death through Dixon's point of view (Figure 4). This twice-removed view of Mildred's dead body (in pictures, and from Dixon's perspective) is uncomfortably lengthy. The spectator is invited to linger on the pictures for a while, peeking at them over Dixon's shoulder, as Dixon himself remains utterly unmoved by the sight of Mildred's dead body. This is an intensely self-reflexive voyeuristic moment, especially because, at

that point, the film might be inviting the audience to align its gaze with that of a killer admiring his work. Yet the violence inflicted on Mildred and the ways in which it is linked to the story she tells before she is murdered are quickly dismissed, relegated to the background of what subsequently becomes a story about romance and its violent, repressed underside.



Figure 4: A twice-removed view of Mildred's dead body (*In a Lonely Place*)

Storytelling, then, is implicated in not only foreseeing, but also in committing violence in its own right. The camera and the gaze are implicated in the violence committed against those who are unable to exert any control over stories even when they try—such is the case with Mildred. Subsequently, even Dixon falls victim to this violence, since he is unable to control the narrative of his own culpability in the crime, which then drives Laurel from him. The critique could be expanded from pertaining only to commercial Hollywood, to include cinema in general, exposing it as a form that violently imposes structure onto the uncomfortable mess that is life. This is where *noir* as a genre allows for incommensurability to remain unresolved, in a way that other genres do not necessarily permit. Dixon's

semi-humorous multiple quasi-confessions to the murder speak to this incommensurability. When confronted with suspicion that he might be the murderer, he responds with a quip: "I've killed dozens of people... in pictures." Similarly, as previously noted, he makes detective Brub and his wife, Sylvia, reenact the (true or false) story of Dixon-as-murderer. During the reenactment, things become uncomfortable, if not explicitly violent, between the couple, when the husband is carried away by Dixon's story and inadvertently starts choking his wife the way Dixon implies that he himself choked Mildred (Figure 5). So, even the re-telling of a violent act is not merely a re-telling—it is an act of violence in and of itself, just as Dixon treats his killing of people in screenplays as potentially viable proof that he is capable of such an act in reality. Thus he makes virtually no distinction between the action and the telling of the action.



Figure 5: Detective Brub is caught in the violence of the reenactment  
(*In a Lonely Place*)

The act of storytelling is cast as being always potentially violent. At the same time, it is what the world of the lonely place that the film depicts is

made of. These stories inevitably enact violence because they attempt to discipline the unconscious, which is utterly resistant to the disciplining forces of closure, coherence and logic. The loose threads in a story—a quintessential trait of *noir*—threaten to expose the workings of the unconscious, and that is what makes the genre so transgressive. The undisciplined incoherence hidden behind any neat story is hinted at by the genre's focus on plot inconsistencies, which in turn reflect the violence of coherent stories that is inflicted in the process of disciplining the unconscious.

*In a Lonely Place* resides in the liminal space between narrative logic and Truth, and the inconsistencies that threaten to unravel them. But, as Freud argued in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1961), it is not this unconscious undisciplined chaos that necessarily generates violence, but precisely the opposite—it is the suppression of the undisciplined through the imposition of coherent stories that is exposed as violence. In other words, the emergence of the hierarchies of culture, dominant truths, and the fetishism of meaning produces a violent disciplining effect on the postmodern psyche and its inherent inner disorder.

Apart from perpetually inflicting such disciplining violence, these dominant narratives are necessary as an integral part of the process through which one becomes a coherent "self," held together by the formation of social order. Kaja Silverman argues:

For a dominant fiction is more than a set of representational and narratological possibilities for articulating consensus. It is also a libidinal apparatus or 'machinery for ideological investment,' an investment which is as vital as labor or exchange to the maintenance of social formation. (Silverman 1990: 115)

Cinema is one way in which Silverman traces the production of these dominant narratives. At the same time, she exposes a number of classic Hollywood films as revealing a stain of sorts, a rupture in these dominant narratives, which refuses to play fully into the maintenance of the expected social formations referred to in the previous quotation. While Silverman does not cite *noir* in particular (her examples have more to do with individual cases rather than genres), I argue that *noir*'s continued vitality (illustrated through continued scholarly scrutiny, as well as the emergence of, for instance, neo-*noir*) lies in the stubborn reemergence of ruptures to dominant narratives, or reiterations of social formations that the audience has come to expect in a (Hollywood) film. *In a Lonely Place* is no exception. The key is, however, that *film noir* does not stray too far from the tropes of dominant narratives, since "a film's sounds and images will only induce general belief



to the degree that they belong to the privileged mode of representation by which the image of the social consensus is offered to the members of a social formation, and within which they identify themselves" (Silverman 1990: 110). Therefore, *noir* operates in a slippage in which dominant narratives are given due attention in the perceived consistencies of cinematic form and style, while at the same time undoing those very narratives by plot inconsistencies, excess of signification, and the emergence of the repressed.

*In a Lonely Place* is a dominant narrative in the form of a postwar romance film, through its story of a tortured man who loses his love interest because of his inability to control his violent (perhaps post-traumatic) temper. That things are not as simple as they seem becomes obvious through the film's constant flirtation with the possibility that Dixon Steele is not just a tortured artistic soul, but might be a heartless killer. Furthermore, as previously illustrated, Laurel is not a typical female object-of-desire, since her own motivations and desires remain as obscure and complicated as the film's title. Even their names are indicative of inconsistencies: the name Dixon Steele is an ironic commentary on the character's ever increasing impotence at controlling the events of his life. And while Laurel's first name may indicate praise for an achievement (the question of *whose* achievement remains open), her last name, as noted earlier, positions her firmly in the gray area between the polarities of "good girl" and femme fatale.

330

The role of narratives in perceptions of the world and its truths is openly acknowledged when Dixon's agent inquires about the interrogation that Dixon has just returned from, expressing concern that the detectives consider Dixon the main suspect in Mildred's murder. To this, he answers: "It was [the detective's] story against mine. I told my story better." Similarly, Dixon later refers to Laurel as "Ms. Gray, my alibi". These instances reveal the film's perpetual highlighting of the (dominant) narratives' central role, and that the focus is on how things are perceived, not on what they are. The investigation into Mildred's murder is not an inquiry into the Truth of what happened; in the world of Dixon Steele there is no such thing as Truth. What the investigation is actually about is who tells their story better, and who has mastered the art of controlling dominant narratives. Dixon is being sarcastic when he refers to Laurel as his alibi, yet he reveals the importance of Laurel's *story* in the discursive field of innocence or guilt. Moreover, it is because of this placement within the discursive field of dominant narration that subjects come into being, through the frameworks of normative gender and sexual difference. The discursive narrativization that brings subjectivity into gendered and sexual being is pushed to its logical extreme when a



person is referred to as a literal embodiment of an alibi, or when a murder investigation is summarized in terms of a competition in which the better storyteller is the truth-teller. The underlying message seems to be that there is not much underneath these layers of narration—there is no ephemeral essence to Laurel's identity apart from the way she is situated narratively, nor is there a finite answer to the mystery of Mildred's murder. Dixon may as well be a violent killer of women (as he himself hypothesizes at one point), but ultimately this does not matter to the film, since it is the story that is told about it that is of most consequence in the end.

Yet what is repressed continues to haunt, and as the film comes to a close, its central protagonists are increasingly tortured, haunted and disheveled. This ever growing anxiety is emphasized by the fact that neither Dixon nor Laurel seem to be getting much relief, even in their sleep—both are seen at different times suffering either from insomnia or nightmares, where what is repressed presumably returns to haunt them. Similarly, the layouts of Dixon and Laurel's living spaces grow increasingly claustrophobic as the film progresses. Laurel is unable to find protection from Dixon's symbolic violence even in the confines of her own apartment. When he discovers that she has locked her bedroom door (to hide her packed suitcase from him), he becomes enraged at the secrecy, but what the scene more poignantly reveals is the decreasing freedom of movement that both characters are experiencing in the ever-growing claustrophobia of postmodern life that surrounds *In a Lonely Place*.

The paradoxes on which the film rests are never fully resolved. While it critiques Hollywood's romance narratives and the dominant gender roles upon which they rest—exposing them as overly sanitized accounts of the otherwise unruly life of the psyche—it nevertheless ends on a quasi-romantic note of tragic undertones, with which the failure of love between Dixon and Laurel is closed off, and their separate futures are uncertain. Similarly, while critical of the post-war era's pressures on the re-privatization of the women's sphere and re-masculinization of public spaces, the film's only alternative to such a scenario is the misery and doom of its main characters. More uplifting alternatives are not only unattainable, but also unimaginable. The film unnervingly implies, then, that postmodernist subjectivity is inevitably encapsulated within the dominant narratives of sanitized coherence, which support the narrow frameworks of gender and sexual difference, since attempts at anything different end in bitter failure. At the same time, the film does not entirely foreclose the possibility of continued existence in that middle ground between expectation and subversion, only temporarily

embodying one or the other but never fully residing in either. Fittingly for *noir*, the story ends before we get a satisfactory resolution, leaving an ambiguous and open-ended anti-closure instead.

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